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RHMFIS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL

C O N F I D E N T I A L BRIDGETOWN 000735

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STATE FOR WHA/CAR  
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/11/19  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM XL  
SUBJECT: GONSALVES DEFENDS TIES WITH VENEZUELA, BUT WELCOMES DEEPER U.S. ENGAGEMENT

REF: BRIDGETOWN 689; BRIDGETOWN 690; BRIDGETOWN 685

DERIVED FROM: DBHardt

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (C) In a three-hour marathon meeting with the Charge October 26, St. Vincent Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves outlined his efforts to combat drug trafficking and crime and his need for new assets and expanded U.S. support. He defended his close ties to Venezuela through ALBA and PetroCaribe, but insisted St. Vincent had no plans to sign onto the SUCRE currency as Chavez would like. One day ahead of St. Vincent's 30th independence day celebration, and a month before the November 25 constitutional referendum, Gonsalves appeared mostly sanguine about his efforts to effect political and social change, even while recognizing that he would probably not win the two-thirds vote needed to win the upcoming referendum. End Summary.

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SVG Stepping up Counter-Drug Efforts and Investment  
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¶12. (C) Kicking off what would be a three-hour meeting, Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves told the Charge that the St. Vincent Police and Coast Guard had been stepping up efforts to go after drug traffickers. He acknowledged that his Government had been forced to address concerns on corrupt elements within the Vincentian Coast Guard, following incidents in which drug interception boats were found suddenly immobile when needed. To root out this corruption, he said that St. Vincent now vets, polygraphs and closely watches personnel. The PM said he would welcome U.S. assistance in polygraphing and broader anti-corruption efforts.

¶13. (C) The Prime Minister lamented that U.S. support to St. Vincent's efforts was not as great as it had been in the past, noting that the U.S. had given St. Vincent its now ageing Sea-Arks and other vessels many years ago. The lack of recent support had left the Coast Guard ill-prepared to patrol St. Vincent and the Grenadines' extensive coastlines on over 14 islands and dozens of cays, he pointed out. To remedy this, Gonsalves outlined his plan

to purchase three new vessels from Malaysia (one P46 Fast Pursuit and two P56 Fast Interceptors) for drug interdiction purposes. He claimed he would have preferred to purchase U.S. vessels, but that he found the Malaysian offer more attractive because of discount payment plans they offered as well as the immediate trial use of the P46. Gonsalves added that he purposefully sought out a country that designed and used vessels for island use to be sure they were appropriate for St. Vincent's multiple island geography.

¶4. (SBU) The Charge cautioned that, while the Malaysian boats may be ideal for calm Malaysian waters, the PM should keep St. Vincent and the Grenadines' choppy channels in mind. The Charge also mentioned that replacement parts for the boats could become an issue, but Gonsalves assured him that the Malaysian boats were fairly standard and universal, and that sourcing parts should not be difficult. The Charge urged Gonsalves to ensure his Coast Guard coordinated with the Embassy's Military Liaison Office, given that office's expanding operational support provided to SVG's Coast Guard through the TAFT (Technical Assistance Field Team). The TAFT's ability to support Coast Guards in the region depended in part on compatibility among vessels in the region. The Charge also noted to Gonsalves that discussions were ongoing with SVG and other countries in the region about new vessels that would be provided through the US Southern Command's Enduring Friendship program.

¶5. (C) Turning to land forces, Gonsalves noted that he had previously increased police salaries by more than forty percent, resulting in improved morale and an increase of better educated candidates entering the force. He also lauded the good work of his elite police unit (the "Men-in-Black") as well as the Financial Investigations Unit, which had been successful in going after drug traffickers by following the money trail. The Charge welcomed these measures, and noted that we were stepping up our support to his FIU in recognition of its effectiveness and strong leadership.

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#### Greater U.S. Support and Engagement Welcome

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¶6. (C) Returning to his earlier lament about the reduction in U.S. security support for St. Vincent, the Prime Minister claimed he was often asked by his party members about U.S. support to St. Vincent, but claimed he was unable to provide concrete information on U.S. activities in country. The Charge noted that he had just shared with Foreign Minister Straker a comprehensive overview of U.S. activities in St. Vincent, and provided the PM with the same list. He pointed out that U.S. engagement was designed to support SVG's own efforts to ensure security and prosperity by building capacity within the country through extensive training and capacity building efforts. This sometimes made our support less visible than a Chinese-built cricket stadium or an airport runway, but we believed that our approach would offer the greatest long-term benefits to St. Vincent. The Charge said that ongoing support included training and equipment to the Vincentian Coast Guard, Financial Investigations Unit, Drug Squad, Police Force and other offices. The Caribbean regional Partnership framework for HIV and AIDS would significantly strengthen the public health infrastructure in SVG. Vincentians have participated in International Visitor, Fulbright, and other exchange programs. And, the Charge added, he had just handed over nearly USD \$80,000 to restore an historic church on the nearby Grenadine island of Bequia, as part of the State Department's Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The PM expressed surprise at the broad scope of U.S. engagement as outlined in our overview, and thanked the Charge for providing the information.

¶7. (C) The major focus on U.S. engagement in the coming months

would be the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), the Charge explained. The CBSI would not only support traditional security programs, but also offer "soft" programs to address social, educational, job training and other aspects of the region's growing crime and violence problems. The Charge reminded Gonsalves about the planned high-level meeting to launch the CBSI, and encouraged high-level Vincentian participation in Washington. Gonsalves was warmly receptive to CBSI, but he also cautioned that our assistance should be balanced throughout the region to "avoid jealousies." Assuring the PM, the Charge said that, even if some activities are based in specific countries, the intent and use would be regional. The Charge pointed to the recently opened Antiguan-based cyber forensics lab, reminding Gonsalves that the lab had already been used successfully in investigations by other countries in the region, including St. Vincent.

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#### Defending Ties to Venezuela

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¶8. (C) In the context of foreign assistance to St. Vincent, Gonsalves put in a plug for ALBA and Venezuela, specifically noting that PetroCaribe and the food security PetroAlimentos programs both supported Vincentian economic and social programs, providing \$18 million in savings that were applied to the construction of the Argyle International Airport, reduced cost fertilizer for farmers and ALBA funded low-income housing projects. ALBA's social

development funds were also facilitating an array of road construction projects, oil storage projects, and social and community projects. Gonsalves recognized that ALBA was a self-promotional tool for Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, but he said it also directly benefitted St. Vincent. He added that using the SUCRE as a unit of account for regional transactions was a logical development for Chavez and some of his ALBA partners, but he made clear that St. Vincent had no intention to participate since its currency was part of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank. The same applied to military cooperation under ALBA, he said, given St. Vincent's membership in the Regional Security System.

¶9. (C) Seeking to deflect criticism of his relationship with Chavez, Gonsalves asserted that the Venezuelan leader had never asked him to do anything he wasn't inclined to do himself. He further lamented that condemnations regarding Chavez's decision to shut down media outlets in Venezuela were mostly unfounded, claiming that such outlets were actually fronts for political activists -- clarifying quickly that such activities, however, do not justify imprisonment. Gonsalves also tried to make clear that he did not support all of Chavez's policies and rhetoric, noting that he did not agree with many of the points in Chavez's UNGA address. The Charge countered that it appeared to us last year that Gonsalves had in fact taken up Venezuela's case when he wrote to his CARICOM colleagues calling for condemnation of the United States over an alleged plot to topple Chavez that Venezuela's Ambassador had brought to the PM's attention. This suggested to us that Venezuela's assistance did come with strings. Gonsalves said that the Venezuelan Ambassador had never asked him to write such a letter and had been surprised he had done so. He wrote it, he claimed, because of what seemed to him to be a credible threat. The Charge countered that Gonsalves could have raised his concerns with us before sharing them regionally, and we could have debunked the claims. Gonsalves said he would have been skeptical of clarifications coming from the previous administration, but felt this would not be the case under President Obama's administration. The Charge encouraged the PM to exercise the same degree of skepticism about future Venezuelan claims.

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New Blood in the Party  
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¶10. (C) Following a discussion of his party's long-term goals for St. Vincent, the Charge asked the PM to assess future leaders within his team. Speaking candidly, Gonsalves listed for the Charge five up-and-comers he said he hoped would one day take greater leadership roles in St. Vincent: Senator Sabato Caesar; Press Secretary Hans King; Deputy Speaker of the House Rochelle Ford; former Senator and Labour Party loyalist Ronald Marks; and his son and UN Ambassador, Camillo Gonsalves. The PM confided that he had high hopes for current Minister of Health Douglas Slater, who was technically very competent, but whose lack of political sensibility would hinder his popularity. The Charge mentioned that these individuals would make good candidates for International Visitor programs, to which Gonsalves jokingly responded that we were seeking to "corrupt" them in the U.S.

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Comment  
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¶11. (C) Despite his leftist orientation and sometimes strong public criticism of the U.S., Gonsalves remains a pragmatic partner who will continue to cooperate with us on the full range of our agenda. His government has in fact worked closely with us on countering drug trafficking and money laundering, and he will be a solid partner in implementing the CBSI. Prime Minister Gonsalves continues to believe that he can play all sides in his peripatetic international efforts to squeeze every cent of support from a

motley crew of international partners. In defending his sketchier associations, he tends to exaggerate his own degree of independence, as reflected in his defense of Venezuela, his letter to CARICOM partners, and his shifts in his UN Third Committee votes on Iran. Nevertheless, he does seek to balance his relations with ALBA and Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran with genuine respect for the United States and the myriad bilateral programs we have in place. Discussions with Gonsalves on Iran, the constitutional referendum, and UNGA Third committee were reported in reftels.  
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